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Situating Soldiers' Demands: Mutinies and Protests in Burkina Faso

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‘Fighting for Their Rights Too’: Military Mutinies and Civilian Protests in Burkina Faso

Abstract:

In Burkina Faso in 2011, military mutinies followed widespread civilian protests, indicating a crisis of confidence for President Compaoré. Through an in-depth look at the events, this research encourages an understanding of military revolts that extends beyond the military. Although the mutineers never united with the demonstrators, their grievances mirrored those of the civilians. The article puts the revolts into a historic context and shows a pattern of interconnectedness between military revolts and civilian demonstrations in Burkina Faso. The work draws on interviews conducted with military personnel and civilians involved in the widespread protests.

Key Words:

Burkina Faso; civil-military relations; armed forces; mass mobilisation

Introduction

Burkina Faso, a country that rarely makes major headlines, became a focal point of international news in October 2014. Hundreds of thousands of Burkinabé took to the streets to express their objection to a proposed constitutional change, which would extend presidential term limits. President Compaoré had already been in power for twenty-seven years at this point and extended term limits were seen as synonymous with an extension of his regime. Demonstrations and tension rose daily in the lead up to the National Assembly vote to amend the constitution on October 30st.

The military responded inconsistently to the growing masses. Most soldiers retreated when crowds arrived at the National Assembly, which suggested they supported the protest or at least were unwilling to actively counter it. Yet at demonstrations near the Presidential Palace and the residence of the president’s brother, the Presidential Guards

(Régiment de Sécurité Présidentiel or RSP) opened fire on unarmed civilians, killing between 19-33 demonstrators.¹ Confusion within the military regarding how to respond to the situation was further seen at the top levels of the hierarchy when two different officers declared themselves Head of State. Following international pressure to have a civilian lead the transition, Michael Kafando was selected as President, while LtCol Zida was appointed Prime Minister until elections were to be held in October 2015. Less than a month before the election date, members of the privileged Presidential Guards obstructed the transitional process by taking hostage the President and Prime Minister. Similar to 2014, civilians responded to this elite political interference with mass demonstrations. Long-standing divisions within the military culminated in 2015 when the regular army attacked the RSP to force a surrender.

The events in 2014 and 2015 spotlighted the importance of the military in Burkina Faso's political landscape, as well as their ambiguous relationship with civilian society. This article will highlight another recent example of the complex civil-military relationship in Burkina Faso through the case of the 2011 crisis. This crisis involved widespread civilian protests followed by the largest mutinies the country has ever seen. The events in 2011 demonstrate a pattern of interdependence between military revolts and mass demonstrations in Burkina Faso. In many ways the actions in 2011 foreshadowed what was to come in 2014-2015.

The article draws on research conducted in 2012 in Ouagadougou, Bobo Dioulasso, and Po. It involved interviews with both officers and enlisted soldiers in the Burkina Faso Army and Air Force.² Interviews were also conducted with civilians involved in or with intimate knowledge of the 2011 protests. These included leaders of labour unions, journalists, academics, human rights activists, and students, along with casual conversations with individuals living in the urban centres.

This research encourages an understanding of military revolts that extends beyond the military. There is a tendency in political science and military studies to perpetuate an 'illusion' that armies are 'separate from the societies over which they are imposed.'³ This pattern is also seen in studies of mutinies, which regularly focus on the material demands of soldiers with limited attention to wider society.⁴ This case study of

mutinies in Burkina Faso counters the trend by emphasizing the interconnectedness of soldiers and civilians. This is done through an in-depth look at mutinies in 2011 as well as through a historical contextualization of military revolts in earlier decades.

The mutinies in 2011 took place alongside mass protests, however the protestors and soldiers never directly united. On the surface this may further emphasize the gap between civilians and soldiers. Yet closer examination of the events in Burkina Faso reveals a more complex situation. The complaints of mutinying soldiers often mirrored the grievances of the protestors, suggesting that the soldiers were drawing some of their inspiration from the demonstrations. Interviews with soldiers show that many of the tensions that provoked mass protests were also applicable to the military as an institution. The same concerns around corruption, injustice, and inequality that were the centre of civilian mass protests were also at the forefront of military mutinies.

The case of overlapping mass protests and mutinies, as seen in Burkina Faso in 2011, also contributes to further understanding the complex dynamics of popular protests. The military's uprisings alongside protests is a valuable example that 'protests occur in a convoluted and tension-ridden social reality...fraught with antagonisms and limited by contradictions.'⁵ The mutinying soldiers often demonstrated an antagonistic, and at times violent, relationship with protestors. Yet their own demands were likely motivated by the demonstrations. Some of the calls of the mutineers were directly contradictory to the demands of the protestors but the soldiers' actions also elicited a much quicker response from the government than when the civilians alone took to the streets. Many of the government's immediate response to the widespread uprising, such as increases to food subsidies and decreases in some taxes, benefitted both civilians and soldiers. While the mutineers and protestors did not join forces, an understanding of the mass protests would be incomplete without taking into account the actions of the mutineers. Similarly, the mutiny must be contextualized alongside the civilian demonstrations.

A Temporary Civilian-Military Union

‘Our country is the champion of the coup d’état’ exclaimed the editorial chief of a major radio station in Ouagadougou, and he was not exaggerating.⁶ According to Powell and Thyne’s coup dataset there have been seven successful coups and one failed coup attempt since Burkina Faso gained independence from France in 1960.⁷ The heavy involvement of the military in politics is reflected in the fact that all Heads of State between 1966 and 2014 had a military background. In addition to the power grabs at the top levels of the hierarchy, the Burkinabé military has also had its fair share of mutinies. Mutiny can be defined as an act of collective insubordination for goals other than political power. They generally involve mostly rank and file soldiers expressing their grievances to senior hierarchy or political leadership. By focusing on the mutinies in Burkina Faso, this article is also a study of the junior ranks, a group that has often been excluded in research on African militaries.

Until 2011, the most well known mutiny in Burkina Faso occurred in the southern city of Po in 1983. The incident was sparked by the arrest of Captain Thomas Sankara, a popular and revolutionary figure, over charges of treason.⁸ Upon hearing of his arrest, the soldiers in Po, led by Sankara’s close friend Captain Blaise Compaoré, took control of the city, including police and customs stations and cut telephone communication to the capital. The mutineers set up roadblocks and held control of the city for two months. Reports from the time claim the atmosphere was tense but there does not appear to have been any violence. The soldiers were clear in their demands; they wanted an unconditional release of their comrade, Captain Sankara.⁹

At the same time that the commandos were mutinying in Po, students throughout the country were protesting on the street for Sankara’s release.¹⁰ The government gave in and released Sankara although still kept him under a loosely-defined house arrest. However, this did not prove to be the end of the saga and tension between the government and Sankara, along with his many followers (both military and civilian), continued. Soon after the Po mutiny, the military overthrew President Ouedraogo and in his place established a ruling council called the Conseil National de la Révolution

(CNR), headed by Sankara.¹¹ The civilian involvement in demanding the release of Sankara and later supporting the coup, led Sankara to claim the overthrow of Ouedraogo was a popular revolution, not a simple military coup.¹²

The civilian and military sectors developed a close relationship during this period. Sankara made efforts to break down the barriers between the civilian population and the military, encouraging soldiers to integrate with civilians. They assisted with the local harvesting, had joint football teams and formed an orchestra together.¹³ Sankara and the CNR made an effort to change the way the military was viewed by the population, as well as the way the military viewed its own role. Whereas traditionally the military in Burkina Faso (and elsewhere in the region) was seen as an extension of an often unpopular regime, Sankara argued that they should be a ‘component of the people’.¹⁴ He publicly stated

the new soldier must live and suffer among the people to which he belongs. The days of the free-spending army are over. From now on, besides handling arms, the army will work in the fields and raise cattle sheep and poultry. It will build schools and health clinics and ensure their functioning.¹⁵

Most military leaders who come to power in a coup make attempts to win the military over with added equipment, salaries, or prestige but instead Sankara in a way “demoted” the military to civilian roles. Furthermore, during this period the military became “juniorized”, giving unprecedented power and influence to the junior ranks. This shift had a structural element to it as well. During Sankara’s rule there was compulsory retirement for all Generals, leaving the command structure void of the senior positions.¹⁶ The shared grievances between civilians and military as well as the empowerment of junior ranks over their seniors are traits seen in the 2011 mutinies.

Sankara and the CNR had plenty of critics at home and abroad and the implementation of their program was not without fault. The revolutionary ideas of Sankara never truly came to fruition and sections of the military can be seen to have killed the revolutionary spirit, both figuratively and literally. In 1987, less than four years after coming to power, Sankara was assassinated. It is widely believed that Compaoré, Sankara’s closest ally, was responsible for the order to kill Sankara.

The harmonious relationship between civilians and military that Sankara initially envisioned did not last, and it would be inaccurate to claim that there is an exceptionally strong civil military relationship in Burkina Faso. Instead, it is more realistic to say that the two have a complex relationship and one in which there is a history of linkages between civilian and military movements, particularly at the lower economic class level. Although youths today, including junior ranks of the military, were not alive when Sankara was in power, he still holds an important place for many Burkinabé.¹⁷ His image, always in a military uniform and his iconic red beret, can be seen on a regular basis in Ouagadougou and was carried through the streets during protests in 2011, 2014, and 2015.

A Tested Tactic

With the death of Sankara, Compaoré became president. He retired his fatigues and was elected as a civilian in 1991, 1998, 2005, and 2010. His numerous wins should not be mistaken for overwhelming popularity. Under Compaoré there were restrictions on opposition parties and voter turn out in presidential elections was low.¹⁸ Despite Compaoré's military background and his history of leading military upheavals (both the mutiny in 1983 and coups in 1983 and 1987), he has not been able to keep the military satisfied. Soldiers in Burkina Faso have used mutinies as a means of expressing their dissatisfaction on a fairly regular basis since the late 1990s.

In July 1999 soldiers who returned from Central African Republic after participating in the MINURCA peacekeeping mission staged a protest over unpaid mission subsidies.¹⁹ The protest quickly spread beyond the peacekeepers to other garrisons throughout the country and these soldiers added complaints about living allowances. They accused senior officers of embezzling the funds that were meant for a military housing project.²⁰ NCOs were used as liaisons between the protesting soldiers and the military hierarchy and the soldiers were paid at least part of the amount they demanded.²¹ The 1999 revolts were similar to the events in 2011 because they occurred

amidst ongoing demonstrations by civilians over the suspected murder of journalist Nobert Zongo by government forces.²²

There were also mutinies by soldiers in 2003, 2006, and 2007. The incident in 2006 was the most threatening of this series. The revolt started as a conflict between police and soldiers in Ouagadougou but quickly escalated to widespread revolts. A week after the incident began the soldiers met with the Ministry of Defense and demanded improvements to the accommodations, welfare allowances, and uniforms.²³ Burkinabé Colonel Nombre argues that soldiers were never penalized for their participation in these events and there were never serious assessments conducted to determine the root causes of the mutinies. He suggests that the problems extend beyond the material realm and recommends major military restructuring was needed to address the growing dissatisfaction.²⁴ However it does not appear that significant changes were made in the military and less than a year later another revolt broke out. A commission was set up and led by President Compaoré's brother, to negotiate between the soldiers and senior military leadership and resulted in the mutineers receiving part of their demands.²⁵ The events in 2011 should be viewed in the context of these series of mutinies. Soldiers were likely emboldened by the immediate material success of their past revolts but also still dissatisfied that the larger issues, such as corruption and favouritism, went unaddressed.

Familiar Dissatisfaction Reignited

The military mutinies of 2011 were directly preceded by and overlapped with the largest civilian demonstrations seen in Burkina Faso since at least 1998-1999.²⁶ During interviews in Burkina Faso, locals referred to the mutinies and civilian demonstrations collectively as 'the 2011 crisis.' The civilian side of this crisis began with protests following the arrest and death of a student named Justin Zongo in Koudougou in late February 2011. The government made an official statement claiming that Zongo died in custody of meningitis, while rumours that he was beaten to death by

police quickly spread. Students throughout the country were outraged that no one was charged with Zongo's death. Within two weeks, the protests spread to dozens of cities throughout the country.

As the protests escalated so did the scope of the grievances. It was no longer just about the perceived injustice of the Zongo case but about other suspected murders that had not been accounted for. Chrysogone Zougmore, President of Burkina Faso's main human rights organization, MBDHP, said 'the crisis was one of years of injustice.'²⁷ Hamidou Idogo, editor and chief of *Journal du Jeudi*, expressed a similar opinion by stating 'here in our country we don't trust authorities anymore. There is crime in every domain and no justice.'²⁸

In addition to the issue of injustice, labour unions, civil society groups, and individuals began to protest high costs of living and low wages, a grievance that much of the country could relate to. The demonstrations grew in size, location, and grievance, with various groups expressing loosely related complaints regarding the state of affairs in Burkina Faso. Farmers in Bobo Dioulasso demonstrated their anger at low cotton prices, while students in Koudougou took to the streets over police repression, teachers in Gaoua demanded higher living allowances and unions in Ouagadougou organized a march calling for an increase in public sector salaries.²⁹

Tensions rose along with the grievances and the protests turned destructive. Heavy handed police responses led to civilian injuries and deaths, further incensing the protesters. Police stations, government buildings, and the ruling party headquarters were vandalized and some set on fire by angry mobs. The targets of destruction were a clear symbol that the demonstrators placed the blame on the government. Despite the widespread nature of the protests, the various demonstrations remained fragmented. There were common themes in their calls but no unified alliance or demands.³⁰

The Military Joins

The situation in Burkina Faso went from bad to worse when after a month of civilian protests, the military started their own demonstrations. The initial cause of the military mutinies was not directly related to the initial cause of the civilian crisis, although both shared complaints about the justice system. Just as the civilian demonstrations quickly added grievances and participants, so did the military revolts. As the mutinies grew, one trait that remained consistent was that all participants were amongst the enlisted ranks.

The initial mutiny was sparked by soldiers' objections to a court ruling. A group of five junior soldiers based in Ouagadougou were arrested after they allegedly beat and publicly humiliated a man who they accused of having inappropriate contact with the wife of a deployed soldier. When the soldiers were given sentences ranging from fifteen to eighteen months in jail, their fellow soldiers took to the streets, firing their weapons in the air and eventually looting local shops in protest of the sentencing.

In interviews with Burkinabé soldiers, they explained that this unit was angry about the sentencing for two main reasons. The first is that they simply felt it was not deserved. They commented that the soldiers felt they were defending the honour of their colleague's wife and noted that any respectable man would agree with them. The second reason, and what one source called 'the most important reason,' was that the rank and file soldiers felt they were being unfairly punished due to their low rank.³¹ One interviewee explained, 'the guys had assumed that the higher officers would speak out on their behalf and they did not.'³² Another provided a similar account by stating 'they were angry at their senior officers for not stepping in.'³³

Soldiers explained that the mutineers were not only resentful that they were punished but also alleged that officers had done much worse in the past without having been charged.³⁴ For example, several different military sources told a story about an officer who had shot his wife and was simply moved to another base rather than charged with a criminal offense. Here the mutinying soldiers made similar accusations as the civilians by claiming that the law was selective. The soldiers never outright mentioned being inspired by the Justin Zongo case, but the movement likely fuelled the accusations of inequality within the legal system. It became easier for the soldiers to claim their case

was mishandled when there were widespread public outcries about the poor state of the Burkinabé justice system.

In order to calm down the mutinying soldiers, authorities released the arrested soldiers. However this angered the justice department who went on strike to protest. Additionally, traders and shop owners whose merchandise had been looted or destroyed by the mutineers began to demonstrate. At this point 'the regime was faced with a multipronged protest which included the movement against impunity, traders, the justice department, and the army.'³⁵ Before the government could resolve this problem, a separate mutiny broke out in Fada N’Gourma, approximately 200 km east of Ouagadougou.

Much like the Ouagadougou mutiny, which occurred just a week earlier, the soldiers in Fada N’Gourma protested a court ruling. In this case the arrested soldier had been convicted of raping a minor.³⁶ The soldiers fired weapons into the air and intimidated authorities into releasing their arrested comrade. Professor Yonaba argues that the release of the soldiers in Ouagadougou and Fada N’Gourma was a major setback for the rights of the Burkinabé people. Overruling the decision of the justice department due to the unruly behaviour of junior soldiers, further delegitimized the government who was viewed as extending the pattern of impunity for military personnel.³⁷ It showed that the law was selective, justifying the civilian accusations about the Justin Zongo case and other previous unresolved crimes.

From this point the mutinies extended to other regions of the country, with the most severe threat occurring on April 14 when the Presidential Guards (RSP) revolted. This was the first time this unit had been involved in a mutiny.³⁸ They claimed their protest was over payment and housing allowances. The mutiny quickly spread to soldiers at Camp Lamizana in western Ouagadougou.³⁹ There were also widespread looting, car thefts, and reports of rape.⁴⁰ The chaotic atmosphere made it difficult to tell if the crimes were committed by military personnel or civilians, however it appears both took part. Media outlets shut down adding to the residents’ anxiety as they did not know what was going on.

President Compaoré's response shows the severity of the situation. Within a day of the RSP revolt he left the capital and took refuge in his hometown of Ziniare, 30 km north of the capital.⁴¹ Just one day later President Compaoré dissolved the government, appointed a new cabinet and Prime Minister, replaced the Chiefs of Staff of the Army, Air Force, and Police and named himself Minister of Defence.

Compaoré quickly gave into the demands of the RSP and a spokesperson for the RSP publicly reaffirmed the unit's loyalty to the president.⁴² However, rather than calm the situation it seemed to inspire other units. Media reports quote soldiers objecting to inequality between military units and demanding that their pay and bonuses be equivalent to that of the RSP.⁴³ Soldiers in Tenkodogo, Kaya, and Po imitated earlier mutinies by firing weapons in the air, looting shops, seizing private vehicles and attacking the houses of senior officers.⁴⁴ Within a month of the initial Ouagadougou revolt, the mutinies had spread to every region of the country with units from the Army, Air Force, and police taking part⁴⁵

During this month of spreading mutinies, civilians were also taking to the streets in a continuation of the protests that began over Justin Zongo's death and had escalated to economic and political demands for change. At times civilians and military seemed united in their calls for increased wages but in other incidents civilians directly protested damage caused by the mutinies and criticized the government for not controlling the armed forces.⁴⁶ On April 28 (two months after the start of the turmoil) the Prime Minister announced a series of changes in response to the widespread civilian and military demands. Key changes included the elimination of the development tax, reduction in the salary tax, and salary increases in the public sector as well as promises to charge senior officials involved in corruption. However, these changes only affected a minority of the population and did little for the bulk of the people who make a living from agriculture.⁴⁷ Promises to increase subsidies on basic commodities had a wider reach across society and the protests became more sporadic.⁴⁸

Although the government seemed to have made progress on the civilian front, the military continued to express its dissatisfaction. New mutinies broke out in Po, Kaya, Dori, Tenkodogo, Dedougou, and Koupela in May 2011.⁴⁹ It is difficult to tell how

exactly these mutinies were resolved but it is likely agreements were made over salary or other material complaints.

After months of dealing with unruly soldiers, the government reached its breaking point at the beginning of June when soldiers in Bobo Dioulasso joined the revolt. Bobo Dioulasso is Burkina Faso's second largest city and home to the second largest military base. The city has a large university student population and a reputation as a rebellious town.⁵⁰ After three days of destructive behaviour by soldiers which shut down the city, Compaoré sent members of the RSP, the Dedougou paratroopers and gendarmerie to 'forcibly disarm' the mutineers.⁵¹ Officially the attack left 6 mutineers and one civilian dead. However, according to several military sources, the number of military casualties was much higher. Following the attack the government announced the dismissal of 566 soldiers, 217 of which were brought up on criminal charges.⁵²

The counter-attack in Bobo Dioulasso put an end to the mutinies but in many ways further perpetuated internal military divisions and set the stage for 2014 and 2015. The RSP had long had a contentious relationship with the regular army and the attack in Bobo Dioulasso put them in direct opposition to the army. Furthermore, while the RSP had also been involved in mutinies, no members of the RSP were among those dismissed. This further increased the sense of injustice that was at the heart of much of the military discontent that triggered the mutinies. The poor relationship between the RSP and regular army was further apparent in 2015 when the RSP attempted a coup with no support from the army. In this incident the situation was the reverse of 2011; the army attacked and 'defeated' the coup attempt by the RSP.

What is unusual about the Burkina Faso mutinies is not that they ended violently, but that they did not end violently sooner. There are few cases in West Africa in which mutinies continued for such a long period before being forcibly put down. One explanation is that the government wanted to use all possible methods before resorting to violence. One military interviewee explained that peaceful negotiation is 'the Burkinabé way.'⁵³ This may be part of the story as Burkina Faso does not have a history of civil war or armed rebellions and past coups and mutinies have been relatively non-violent. However, the massive scale of the mutinies alongside the widespread civilian protests

was also likely a reason Compaoré was reluctant to use physical force against mutineers. Additional violence could have spark more demonstrations or even lead to a collaborative expression of discontent between the military and civilian protestors. Compaoré had benefitted from the latter in 1983 and later became victim of the pattern in 2014. In 2011 he attempted to avoid a larger uprising with concessions for both civilian protestors and mutineers.

Tensions within the Ranks

Much like the ongoing civilian protests, the mutinies were fragmented. There was no leader or unified demands. Soldiers explained that they found out about deals struck by mutineers in other parts of the country through cell phone calls to their friends at other bases, rather than through any centrally organized efforts.⁵⁴ While there was no single list of grievances presented by the mutineers, interviews with soldiers from various units reveal common concerns across the junior ranks of the military.

Media reported that the mutinies were sparked because soldiers had not been paid; however all soldiers that I spoke with stated that this was inaccurate.⁵⁵ They explained that one of several grievances involved a more nuanced issue of living allowances.⁵⁶ Soldiers are entitled to a salary and a living allowance and the living allowance is easier to manipulate.⁵⁷ The living allowance goes towards housing and food, which is often provided by the military and thus not paid in full. Soldiers perceived that they should be getting more/better food and housing for the amount that their living allowance is worth. There were also allegations that senior officers were taking part of this allowance for their own purposes.⁵⁸

The military respondents explained that the regular indiscipline in the military has its roots in pervasive corruption and favouritism within the armed forces. Numerous interviewees stated that the problems begin with the recruitment process, which they argued has become very personalized. One military source went into great length about a concept within the Burkinabé military called ‘Command Lists.’ He explained

So say the military is recruiting 500 individuals. The head of the army will get to submit 10 names, then the regional commander submits 10, then the base commander, and so on, even down to the local chief. These individuals are hand selected based on their affiliation and do not have to pass the other requirements, such as the physical tests. But those that have no affiliation must pass strict tests. Then when they get to basic training, the trainers know who is from the list, they are concerned about being too harsh on those that were selected by top officers. So those individuals get a pass again, while the others are treated very poorly. Everyone understands the system and it creates major divides from the start.⁵⁹

Other military sources made similar accusations, one stated, ‘rich people send their sons and daughters to the military and no one can bother them.’⁶⁰ Another soldier exclaimed ‘officers can bring their children into the military, this is a problem because their superiors are afraid to discipline them because they are the sons of their boss.’⁶¹ Yet another soldier alleged, ‘there is favouritism in recruiting, they don’t see who is best, they select sons of officers.’⁶² The recruitment issue has become particularly relevant in recent years as Burkina Faso recruited 2,000 individuals between 2008 and 2011. This is a substantial number considering the entire force is between 7,000 and 8,000 (not including the gendarmerie).⁶³

Soldiers also alleged that there is not a fair method of rewards and promotions within the military. For example, one military source expressed anger that despite having the top aptitude score he was passed over for officer training by others who he claimed were connected but less qualified.⁶⁴ Another raised specific concerns about the way individuals are selected for deployments. He complained that peacekeepers are chosen from among the senior officers’ friends and relatives.⁶⁵ Another military source backed this up by stating, ‘if you do not know someone, you will never be assigned to an important mission.’⁶⁶ With Burkina Faso increasing its contributions to foreign missions, this is a concern that will likely continue if the hierarchy does not address it.

Underlying these complaints is distrust towards officers who the junior soldiers viewed as endorsing and perpetuating a system that they perceive as based on

favouritism. Interviewees were not shy to criticize senior officers, particularly. One soldier, speaking particularly about the senior officers stated

officers are taking advantage of their positions, driving big cars, living in big houses in Ouaga 2000 always going on foreign training opportunities, gaining more profit while the others are living like normal Burkinabé.⁶⁷ The juniors work the most and gain the least, while the officers work the least and gain the most, it should be the opposite. This creates a lot of frustration for privates and NCOs.⁶⁸

A junior soldier believed that most individuals got to a senior position through means other than merit, and therefore he explained that there is no respect for the senior officers among the rank and file.⁶⁹ The officers appeared to recognize that they had no control over their subordinates. When I asked soldiers where the officers were while the rank and file took to the streets, answers included ‘hiding’ and ‘they ran away.’ No one indicated that the individual officers attempted to regain their authority.

These detailed grievances and faults confirm findings by Mathieu Hilgers and Augustin Loada who assess that the mutineers ultimately wanted better governance of the defense sector and more transparency and accountability of the management of resources in the security sector.⁷⁰ The numerous complaints of the soldiers were not new in 2011 but the broader sense of distrust and dissatisfaction towards the top authorities expressed in the demonstrations seemed to resonate with and inspire the mutineers. As one military officer explained ‘The importance of the unrest beginning with civilian protests should not be underestimated, without them the soldiers probably wouldn’t have acted out.’⁷¹

This pattern of mutinies occurring alongside civilian protests can be seen in many cases across the continent.⁷² It demonstrates the interconnections between junior soldiers and the civilian population. Much attention has been given, particularly within the media, to the often-antagonistic relationship between junior ranks and youth protestors. Soldiers have often clashed with youth protestors and security personnel on university campus is an ongoing point of contention in Burkina Faso.⁷³ Yet junior soldiers are also of the same peer group as many of the youth protestors and important

connections exist. They share many of the same interests and often maintain personal links with urban youth and university students. Many of the student protestors I interviewed were critical of the military but also willing to introduce me to their friends in the armed forces, whom they knew from their neighbourhoods growing up. Although military hierarchies often try to separate soldiers from the civilian population through uniforms, grooming standards, and military housing, the reality is that there is often overlap in lifestyle, interests, and personal networks between soldiers and the civilians, especially youths. These linkages help explain the way that soldiers came to draw inspiration from the protests. However, it also shows the complexity of the relationship. Ideas expressed by civilian protestors, themselves divided, were not simply transferred to soldiers but instead reinterpreted in various ways by different groups of mutineers. Thus the crisis of 2011 expressed common themes but quite different and even contradictory demands.

‘This is Just the Beginning’

In response to the mutinies, the government made several changes within the armed forces. Amongst the most high profile was the dismissal of the Chiefs of Staff of the Army, Air Force, and Police. Sources explained that although the Army Chief of Staff in particular was unpopular, his removal did not placate the mutinying soldiers.⁷⁴ Rank and file soldiers are far too removed from the Chief’s of Staff to be largely effected by a shift in personnel at that level. Furthermore, a military officer explained that the ‘fired’ senior officers were not actually removed from service, just rotated into a different position.⁷⁵ Military interviewees acknowledged that there have been some immediate benefits from the mutinies. Junior soldiers reported that their salaries have increased (along with civil servants) and that some of the food issues have been resolved. The request to allow soldiers to purchase their own food, rather than have it provided by the military, was granted.

A Burkinabé military source also noted that the government took measures to make it physically more difficult for soldiers to mutiny, or at least to cause such

widespread violence. There was concern over how easily soldiers throughout the country were able to access ammunition. Therefore, the ammunition is now more centralized, most secured at one base rather than spread throughout the number of smaller bases and outposts. He claims that although soldiers still carry guns, few have any ammunition.⁷⁶

High-level personnel changes and increased payments, along with the mass dismissals, did not address the systemic problems within the military. One military source summed it up nicely by saying ‘the problem is deeper than just removing a person, it is the same structures, the same people and the same philosophy.’⁷⁷ Another enlisted soldier also expressed concern that structural issues in the military persisted by noting ‘there is still a part of the army that cannot be touched.’ When I questioned who specifically he was referring to he responded “those that are closest to the President”, meaning the RSP.⁷⁸ When asked about what changes they would like to see one soldier responded ‘a new generation of officers’ and another said, ‘we need new blood.’ Yet another military interviewee backed up these sentiments by explaining ‘we need new young officers with education, a new way of doing things, in one word we need new.’

During interviews in 2012 both military and civilians had a strong sense that the crisis in 2011 was not fully resolved and more tension was yet to come. Some individuals made bold statements such as ‘to be sincere, this is just the beginning’ and ‘the crisis is not behind us, it is in front of us.’⁷⁹ A source within the Burkinabé military described the series of mutinies since the 1990s and pointed out that with each successive demonstration, the military has become more violent. He said he is worried that if this pattern continues the next round could be devastating to the country.⁸⁰ Several other interviewees shared this opinion with responses such as ‘next time it will be worse’ and ‘if it happens again I think it will be a full revolution.’ In many ways these respondents accurately predicted what was to come in 2014. The same desire for new blood, as expressed within the military, was seen in the widespread civilian calls for an end to Compaoré’s rule.

Beyond the Barracks

Similar to the military interviewees, civilian informants expressed a sense of both accomplishment and reservations about the outcomes of the 2011 events. Many commented on progress within the justice system, which was likely linked to several high profile cases against senior officials that were ongoing at the time.⁸¹ They also noted that charges were brought against officers involved in the death of Justin Zongo (the individual whose murder touched off the initial demonstrations). Others commented on everyday changes such as reduced prices for food items and increases in salaries. Despite acknowledging improvements, most did not feel that the reforms went far enough. Many noted the initial decreases in commodity prices had crept back up and there had not been significant changes in employment opportunities.

In addition to these post-crisis changes, it is important to acknowledge that the military uprising also resulted in dozens of injured civilians, numerous reported rapes, and large-scale damage to shops and private residences. Between those that experienced the mutinies first hand and those that heard of it through the extensive local media coverage, one might assume that there would be a widespread negative opinions of soldiers amongst the civilian population. However, based on interviews this does not appear to be the case. Numerous interviewees expressed the belief that although the violence enacted by the military was wrong, they were forced into the situation because they have no other way to express their complaints. In the interviews it was clear individuals were referring to the ‘regular’ rank and file soldiers, not officers or members of the RS. A sample of such comments include:

They [soldiers] should be able to strike, our government does not allow the soldiers to strike.

We are a democratic country, it is unfair that they [soldiers] cannot participate.

Those soldiers, they were fighting to claim their rights too, even a soldiers needs to take care of his family, the hierarchy is the problem.

Many felt that the junior ranks of the military are poorly treated. For example, a Burkinabé professor stated that he was not surprised by what happened because ‘those guys are abused, have no rights, they have bad living conditions, it is all they can do.’⁸² Another academic furthered this point by stating, ‘all Burkinabé should be treated equal but the military are often treated badly and they don’t have their rights.’ He added that their actions should be condemned and they should have brought their case to the judge. He believes ‘all this happened because the military does not trust the justice system of Burkina Faso.’⁸³ Despite nearly every civilian interviewee stating that they were shocked and worried by the violence unleashed by the mutinying soldiers, many were sympathetic to the soldiers’ causes and placed the overall blame on the government.

These interviewee responses often framed the military revolts as part of wider tensions within the state. This sense that the mutinies were of importance beyond just the military can be seen in a play, film, and music video that were each released about the revolt. The film, titled “Le foulard noir” was created by the accomplished Burkinabé filmmaker, Boubacar Diallo. It was screened nightly in various cities in Burkina Faso in spring of 2012 and was recommended to me on numerous occasions by both military and civilian interviewees. The film portrays the mutinies in a measured light. Although there are scenes of graphic violence, there are also representations of friendships and relationships between the soldiers and civilians. It is a fictionalized story but includes pictures and footage from the actual mutinies. The presentation of mutinies in this forum is particularly noteworthy given that cinema holds an important and influential place in Burkina Faso. Since the 1960s it has hosted the FESPACO film festival, which attracts large crowds of locals and international attendees. The country has become known for its filmmakers, which is a source of national pride.

Another cinematic recreation of the mutinies was the music video for “Voir sombrer ses fils” by the rap group Waga3000. This group has both local and international appeal, with regular international tours and digital sales on many major music websites. The song and video focus on the issue of injustice and critiques both the military and politicians. The musicians also situate the events in a wider historical context. For example one of the rapper is wearing a shirt with the picture of Norbert

Zongo, the investigative journalist murdered in 1998. Similar to “Le foulard noir,” the military is not portrayed as one-dimensional. In some parts soldiers are shown attacking civilians and one scene implies rape. Yet, the musicians are wearing parts of military uniforms and a final scene shows a soldier and civilian embracing.

The popular media reproductions of the mutinies in some ways challenge the common notion of mutinies as internal military revolts which are often sparked by “basic and immediate needs” of soldiers.⁸⁴ Instead there seemed to be a sense that the mutinies had relevance beyond the barracks. Many saw the soldiers’ efforts as one of wider proportions, which include many of the same themes of injustice, inequality, and corruption that affect the civilian population. This follows a historic pattern of interrelated civilian and military efforts to demand change.

Conclusion

The pattern of overlapping military revolts and popular protests in Burkina Faso demonstrates the linkages between civilians and rank and file soldiers. Through an examination of the case of military revolts in 2011, the article argues for the need to view mutinies in the context of wider societal tensions. The soldiers’ grievances extended far beyond material issues and suggested deep discontent within the ranks. Mutinying soldiers expressed a sense of injustice towards a system that they believed represented corruption and favouritism. These problems are deeply ingrained in the military and affect recruitment, promotions, and selection of opportunities such as deployments. The perception of corruption led to a lack of authority and legitimacy amongst the officers in the eyes of their subordinates. The division among the ranks was demonstrated during the mutinies, in which only rank and file soldiers participated.

Many of the grievances amongst the soldiers mirrored the civilian demonstrations and it is likely that soldiers drew inspiration for their revolt from the ongoing protests. The crisis in Burkina Faso in 2011 also shows that the interconnectedness of popular protests and mutinies are complex and often

unpredictable. The inspirations, actions, and outcomes of the demonstrations and revolts were influenced by each other, without ever directly aligning.

The mutinies in Burkina Faso remained of interest to much of the civilian population because the soldiers' actions were not seen as purely a military matter. The revolts had severe consequences on the civilian population but were seen by many as also a part of a wider struggle. Although Sankara's vision of the military may not have been fulfilled, the consistent connections between military indiscipline and civilian mass actions suggests that the armed forces are very much a 'component of the people' in Burkina Faso.

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¹¹ Englebert, *Burkina Faso: Unsteady Statehood*, 55.

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¹⁵ Sankara, *Speeches from the Burkina Faso Revolution*, 47.

¹⁶ Harsch, *Thomas Sankara: An African Revolutionary*, 64-65.

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